BHADAWARISM

THE INSCRIPTIONS OF ATER FORT:

A CORPUS

AND

PALEOGRAPHIC STUDY

A Systematic Documentation & Analysis of the Epigraphical Records

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INTRODUCTION

Inscriptions are among the most reliable primary sources for reconstructing the political, social, and architectural history of early modern India. They provide direct evidence of royal patronage, construction activities, administrative practices, and the individuals involved in such undertakings. The study of inscriptions, when combined with palaeographic analysis, helps in understanding both the historical context and the development of writing styles over time.

This research presents a corpus and palaeographic study of the inscriptions of Ater Fort, located in the Bhind District's Ater *Tehsil*, Chambal division of northern Madhya Pradesh. The study is based on first-hand documentation and examination of inscriptions found at the fort, particularly those located in the Raja Ka Bangla and Rani Ka Bangla, dating to the 18th century, and the earliest inscription inside the fort, belonging to the 17th century. These inscriptions were issued under the patronage of the Bhadauria rulers, who controlled the Ater–Bhadawar country during this period.

The inscriptions primarily record construction activities, such as the building or renovation of structures, and mention the names of rulers, officials, artisans, and other individuals associated with these works. Through systematic recording, transcription, and translation, this study establishes a corpus of these inscriptions and examines their script, letter forms, orthography, and stylistic features.

By applying palaeographic methods, the research aims to contribute to a better chronological understanding of the inscriptions and to trace the development of writing practices in the region during the 17th and 18th centuries. The study also seeks to highlight the historical significance of Ater Fort as an important centre of regional power and architectural activity under the Bhadauria Rajputs.

ATER FORT

Ater Fort (*26.748°N, 78.637°E*) is located in Bhind District, approximately 35 km (*22 miles*) northeast of Bhind town. The fort stands amid the ravines of the Chambal region, on the western edge of the town of Ater. It is a structural fort of elongated and irregular plan, measuring a little over 700 feet in length from east to west and about 325 feet in width from north to south.

The enclosing wall of the fort is strengthened by fifteen bastions, of which two are rectangular in shape while the remaining are circular. Traces of an outer defensive wall with two additional bastions are also visible. The main entrance is situated at the south-west corner and consists of a broad passage passing through four successive gateways. The fort was constructed using stone, brick, mud, and lime mortar.

Originally, the fort contained five inscriptions; however, only three are presently extant. These are located at:

1. On the wall beside the Raja ka Bangla.
2. The Raja ka Bangla.
3. The Rani ka Bangla.

WALL INSCRIPTION OF SAMVAT 1701

On the northern wall facing the Raja ka Bangla, the inscription is situated on the upper portion of the wall to the right side when viewed from satellite imagery. Now let's proceed to examine and analyze the inscription in detail.

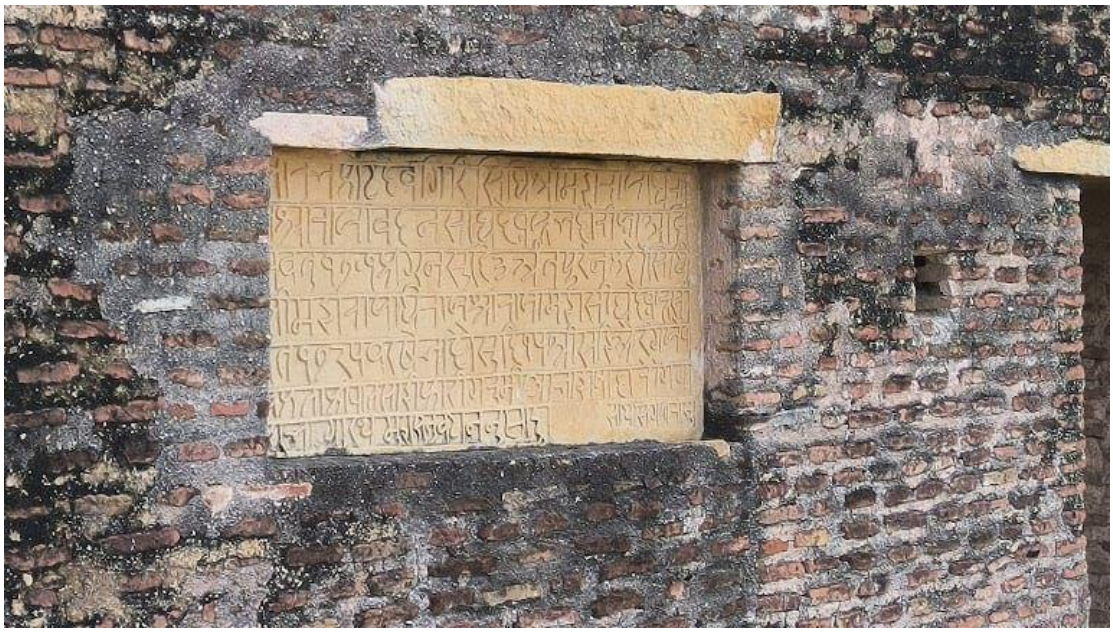

Figure 1: The first inscription of the fort

Figure 2: The Northern Wall and the exact location of the inscription

The inscription is executed in a early modern Devanagari script characterized by a continuous *shirorekha*, vertically elongated letter forms. There are altogether 7 lines of writing. The inscription records the commencement and completion of construction work at the fort of Devgiri under successive Bhadauria rulers and reflects the administrative practices of the early modern period. It opens with the initiation of the work under Maharajadhiraj Raja Badan Singh Dev Bhadauria in *Vikram Samvat* 1701, on the third day of the bright fortnight of *Phalguna*, marking the formal beginning of the project. The completion is noted during the reign of Maharajadhiraj Raja Maha Singh Dev in *Vikram Samvat* 1725, on the fifteenth day of the bright fortnight of *Bhadrapada*, with a contemporaneous reference to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, indicating the broader imperial political context. The inscription further lists the officials and craftsmen associated with the construction, including the master artisan Miyan Tashé Khan, the supervisor (*daroga*) Thakur Bhagirath, and other personnel such as Mahesh Tubar (Tomar) and Nainusai, followed by a group of stone-cutters (*Sangtarās*). Linguistically, the text is composed in Bhadawari dialect, a mix of Braj and Bundeli.

The transcription of the inscription:

1. आरंभ कोट देवगिरी सिधि [सिद्धि] श्री महाराजाधिरा
2. ज श्री राजा बदन सीघ [सिंह] देवजू भदौरिया आदि
3. संवतु [संवत] १७०१ फागुन सुदि 3 अन्त पूरन करो सिधि [सिद्धि]
4. श्री महाराजाधिराज श्री राजा महा सीघ [सिंह] देवजू सं
5. वत १७२५ वरषे [वर्ष] भादौ सुदि १५ श्री सहि औरंगजेब
6. बकता का पातशाही [बादशाही] कारीगर मियाँ ताशे खाँ दरोगा ठा
7. कुर भागीरथ महेश तुबर [तोमर] नैनुसाई (.....) साथी संगतरास

Translation:

Ārambha koṭa Devagirī sidhi [siddhi] Śrī Mahārājādhirāja Śrī Rājā Badan Sīgh [Siṅgh] Devjū Bhaḍauriyā ādi Saṁvatu [Saṁvat] 1701 Phāguna sudi 3 anta pūrana karo sidhi [siddhi] Śrī Mahārājādhirāja Śrī Rājā Mahā Sīgh [Siṅgh] Devjū saṁvat 1725 varaṣe [varshe] Bhādau sudi 15 Śrī Sahi Aurangzeb bakata kā pātaśāhī [bādaśāhī] kārīgara Miyā̃ Tāśe Khā̃, darogā Ṭhākura Bhāgīratha, Maheśa Tuṁbara [Tomar], Nainusāī ……sāthī saṅgatarāsa

This inscription of Ater Fort is composed in a regional vernacular closely aligned with the Bhadawari dialect, incorporating a mixed epigraphic register that blends local Hindi usage with Sanskrit royal titulature and Persian administrative vocabulary. It records the commencement of construction at the fort of Devgiri (Ater) under Maharajadhiraj Raja Badan Singh Dev Bhadauria in V.S year 1701 (circa 1644 CE. The completion of the work is noted during the reign of Maharajadhiraj Raja Maha Singh Dev Bhadauria in V.S year 1725 (circa 1668 CE, with a contemporaneous reference to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, situating the project within the broader imperial political framework of the seventeenth century. The inscription further documents the organized labor structure involved in the construction, naming the imperial master craftsman Miyan Tashé Khan, the supervising officer (*daroga*) Thakur Bhagirath, and other artisans, followed by a collective of stone masons (*sangtaras*).

Overall, the inscription functions as a construction record that not only establishes a clear chronological sequence of the fort's development but also reflects the interaction between regional Bhadauria authority and Mughal administrative culture, illustrating how local polities negotiated power, labor, and legitimacy within early modern North India.

RAJA KA BANGLA INSCRIPTION

In the second quadrangle of the fort, on its northern side, stands the Raja Ka Bangla. On the roof of this structure is a pavilion comprising two small chambers and five arched openings. The inscription is located above these arches.

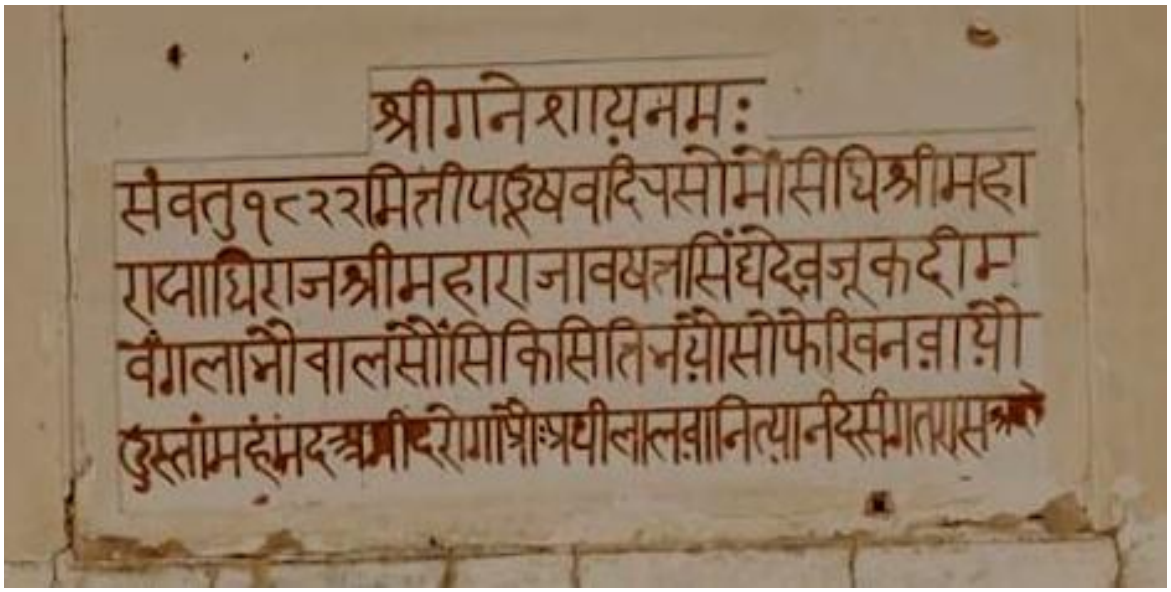

Figure 3: The Raja Ka Bangla inscription

Figure 4: The Raja Ka Bangla and the location of inscription

The inscription is also executed in a early modern Devanagari script characterized by a continuous *shirorekha*, vertically elongated letter forms. It opens with a customary invocation to Lord Ganesha, indicating an auspicious commencement of construction activity. It is dated to Vikram Samvat 1822 (circa. 1765 CE), on the second day of the dark fortnight of the month of Paush, falling on a Monday. The record refers to the reign of Maharajadhiraja Shri Maharaja Bakhat Singh Devju, under whose authority the structure known as the Bangla had earlier been damaged by an earthquake (*bhūchāl*). The inscription notes that the building was subsequently repaired or rebuilt, with the work carried out by Ustad Muhammad Ami/Amin, identified as the master craftsman, under the supervision (*daroga*) of Prithvilal and Nityanand, along with the participation of stone masons (*sangat rās*). Linguistically, the inscription is composed in a vernacular register closely related to Bhadawari dialect with administrative Persian terms such as *ustad* and *daroga*, reflecting the hybrid epigraphic culture of early modern north India. Overall, it serves as a valuable record of seismic damage, royal patronage, and local building organization in the fort's architectural history.

The transcription of the inscription:

1. श्री गनेशाय [गणेशाय] नमः
2. संवतु [संवत] १८२२ मितीय पऊष [पौष] वदिय [वदि] सोमे [सोमवार] सिधि [सिद्धि] श्री महा
3. राजाधिराज श्री महाराजा बखत सिंघ [सिंह] देवजू कदीम
4. बंगला भौचाल [भूचाल] सों सिकिसिति भयो सो फेरि बनवायौ
5. उस्तादमहंमद [मुहम्मद] अमी दरोगा औ पृथ्वीलाल व नित्यानन्द संगत रास।

Translation:

Śrī Gaṇeśāya Namaḥ Saṁvatū (Samvat) 1822 mitīya Pauṣa vadiyā (vadī) Soma (Somavāra) siddhi Śrī Mahārājādhirāja Śrī Mahārājā Bakhat Siṅgha Devjū kadīma Baṅglā (Baṅgalā) bhaucāla (bhūcāla) so sikisiti bhayo so pheri banvāyau (banvāyo) Ustāda Muḥammad Amī Darogā au Pṛthvīlāla va Nityānanda saṅgata-rāsa.

The inscription shows a practical administrative approach in the Bhadauria state, recording damage to a building caused by an earthquake and its repair under royal authority. The language combines the local Bhadawari dialect with Persian administrative terms such as *ustad*, *daroga*, and *kadīm*, reflecting interaction between Rajput rule and early modern Indo-Islamic bureaucratic traditions. Rather than being a ceremonial royal praise, the inscription serves as a construction record, emphasizing regular maintenance of fort structures and the involvement of both local and Muslim craftsmen during the mid-eighteenth century.

RANI KA BANGLA INSCRIPTION

In the same location, the second quadrangle of the fort, on its southern side, stands the Rani Ka Bangla. Similary to Raja Ka Bangla, on the roof of this structure is a pavilion comprising two small chambers and three arched openings in between. The inscription is located above these arches.

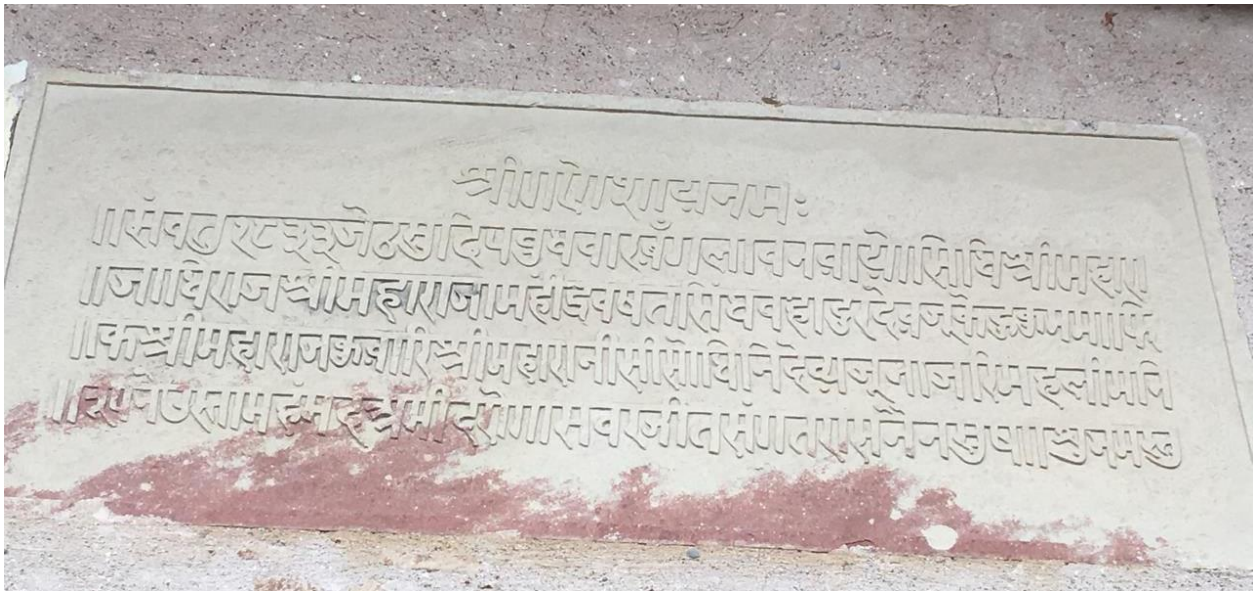

Figure 5: The Rani Ka Bangla inscription

Figure 6: The Rani Ka Bangla and the location of inscription

Similarly to the Raja Ka Bangla inscription, this inscription is also executed in a early modern Devanagari script characterized by a continuous *shirorekha*, vertically elongated letter forms. It opens with the customary auspicious invocation "Shri Ganeshaya Namah" and is dated to Samvat 1833, in the bright fortnight (*sudi*) of the month of Jyeshtha**,** on a Wednesday, corresponding approximately to 1776 CE (late eighteenth century). It records the successful construction (*bangla banvayo*) of a residential or palatial structure under the authority of Maharajadhiraja Shri Maharaja Mahendra Bakhat Singh Bahadur Devju. The work was undertaken by royal command and patronage, with special mention of Maharajakumari Shri Maharani Sisodhini/Sisodiya Devyaju, who appears to have supervised or financially supported the project through her appointed agent (*nazirim/halim mani rūp*). The craftsmen involved included Ustad Muhammad Amin as the master builder, Savarjit as *daroga* (overseer), and Nainsukha identified as *sangataras* (stone mason), concluding with the benedictory phrase "Shubhamastu" ("May it be auspicious").

Linguistically, the inscription is composed in a vernacular idiom closely related to the Bhadawari dialect, blended with Persian administrative and professional terms such as *ustad*, *daroga*, and *nazrim*, reflecting the hybrid bureaucratic culture of early modern north India. Rather than functioning as a formal royal eulogy, the record serves as a constructional document, illustrating patterns of elite patronage, the role of royal women in architectural commissions, and the collaborative involvement of Hindu and Muslim artisans in fort-building activities during the later eighteenth century.

The transcription of the inscription:

1. श्री गणेशाय नमः
2. संवतु [संवत] १८३३ जेठ [ज्येष्ठ] सुदीय बुधवार बँगला [बंगला] बनवायौ सिधि [सिद्धि] श्री महारा
3. जाधिराज श्री महाराजा महिन्द्र बखत सिंघ [सिंह] बहादुर देवजू के हुकुम माफी
4. क श्री महाराजकुँवारि श्री महारानी सीसोधिनि देव्यजू नाजरिम हली मनि
5. रूप ने उस्ताद महंमद [मुहम्मद] अमी दरोगा सवरजीत संगतरास नैनसूखा। शुभमस्तु

Translation:

Śrī Gaṇeśāya Namaḥ Saṁvatu [Saṁvat] 1833 Jēṭha [Jyaiṣṭha] Sudīya Budhavāra Baṅglā Banvāyau Sidhi [Siddhi] Śrī Mahārā**j**ādhirāja Śrī Mahārājā Mahendra Bakhat Siṅgha [Siṁha] Bahādura Devjū ke Hukuma Māphīka Śrī Mahārājakuṁvāri Śrī Mahārānī Sīsōdhinī Devjū Nājarima Halī Manirūpa nē Ustāda Mahaṁmada [Muḥammad] Amī Darōgā Sarvajīta Saṅgatarāsa Nainsūkhā. Śubhamastu.

The inscription reflects an organized and practical system of architectural patronage in the Bhadauria state, in which construction activities were carefully recorded with specific dates, royal approval, and defined administrative roles. Its language combines the local Bhadawari dialect with Persian professional terms, showing the mixed cultural and bureaucratic traditions of early modern north India. The repeated mention of Ustad Muhammad Amin in this second inscription from Ater Fort indicates continuity of skilled craftsmen working under Raja Bakhat Singh, suggesting established workshop practices rather than one-time projects. Overall, the inscription serves more as an official construction record than as royal praise, emphasizing ongoing investment in fort architecture and the active involvement of the Sisodiya queen in these works during the late eighteenth century.

NOTE: The remaining two inscriptions are presently obscure and could not be documented in this study, as the author has not yet conducted a personal field survey at Ater Fort. However, information regarding the fourth inscription was obtained through local oral accounts and from Dr. Shambhu Singh Bhadauria, who personally surveyed the fort in c. 1985. According to these sources, the inscription was originally located on the well in the second quadrangle of the fort, positioned in front of the temple pavilion. It reportedly recorded the commissioning of the well's construction during the seventeenth century, most likely under Raja Maha Singh. Due to accidental displacement, the inscribed slab is now said to lie inside the well. Future efforts will be directed toward its recovery and documentation.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the three inscriptions from Ater (Devgiri) Fort offer important evidence for the architectural, administrative, and social practices of the Bhadauria state from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth century. Written in early modern Devanagari script with similar palaeographic features, they show continuity in inscriptional tradition across different reigns. In chronological terms, the records document both new construction projects and later phases of repair and reconstruction, indicating sustained royal attention to the fort's maintenance over nearly a century. The repeated mention of officials and craftsmen - especially Ustad Muhammad Amin - points to organized systems of building supervision and long-term artisan networks rather than temporary labour arrangements. Linguistically, the mixture of Bhadawari vernacular with Persian administrative terms reflects the hybrid bureaucratic culture of early modern north India.

Overall, these inscriptions function mainly as practical construction records rather than ceremonial royal praise, highlighting governance, patronage, responses to natural damage, and cooperative craftsmanship, including the involvement of royal women. As a group, they contribute significantly to our understanding of regional authority, building practices, and everyday administration in the Bhadawar country during the early modern period